

The international responsibility against genocide

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I was impressed by the commemoration which the German authorities organized on Thursday the 23rd of February for the victims of extreme right violence. Germany feels a special responsibility in this matter because of its past. The Nazi regime committed the biggest documented genocide ever in the history of mankind. Looking back no one was able to understand how such crimes could occur in a nation that is part of Western culture and civilization. Yet it was thanks to that same civilization that after 1945 the German people did penance. Western civilization in terms of humanity and democracy had survived the barbarian Nazi regime. Few nations in the world deal so much with the crimes that were committed in their name as Germany does. It does not conceal, it does not minimize, it does not deny the Jewish genocide. That testifies its moral greatness. The contrast is striking with nations which do everything to conceal, to minimize, even to deny the crimes previous regimes committed on their soil.

The murder on the Jews, the Holocaust, brought the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to present a draft resolution for a Genocide Convention. This UN-Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide would then define in 1948 genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.

Despite these clear wordings there are still politicians and academics in some nations who dare to say that mass slaughter that took place there before the date of that Convention must not be coined as genocide as the coinage did not yet exist at the time of the slaughter. It would be in a cynical way the same as to say that schizophrenia did not exist before 1908 when Eugen Bleuler inaugurated that word. Another trick to minimize a genocide is the use of the word 'tragedy', e.g. to depict the Armenian genocide as 'the tragic events of 1915'. But what is a tragedy? In the

Greek sense of the word people are touched by fate and go down or die by the so-called 'will of the gods' (like in classic Greek tragedies) or what we nowadays would call a 'natural catastrophe'. Indeed, in a 'tragedy' there are victims, but who caused their destruction? Where are the human beings that kill? Coining a mass slaughter not as genocide but as tragedy means to pass the responsibility of the murderers to an impersonal power.

The definition of the Convention is clear: the planned murder on a people or a part of a people is genocide. I would even dare to propose a neologism as a synonym, namely 'peuplocide'. Whether we point to the victims with the Latin word 'genus' or with the French word 'peuple', what matters is the suffix -cide from Latin for killing. A group of people has been killed and this murder was planned. One could think of plans that lie waiting in the office of politicians and bureaucrats to be implemented. But planning does not need only to exist out of such schemes. It could also exist in the preparation of a mental climate in which the genocide is going to take place. That means that some years precede the moment of the genocide itself by making the mentality of the future murderers ripe for committing the genocide. The Armenian genocide of 1915 was preceded by an anti-Armenian climate under the regime of Abdül Hamid II. It did not happen suddenly or as a so-called 'tragedy' as the pogroms of 1895 prove. The Jewish genocide also rose from a climate that was poisoned by anti-Semitism in the preceding decades in Germany. A genocide is in fact the culmination of feelings of hatred that are slumbering since a long time and that are directed by the state towards destruction. The same applies to the genocide of Halabja. The Kurdish genocide was prepared by an anti-Kurdish climate in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Genocide turns into a double genocide when it is being denied or minimized. The dead are being killed a second time when the remembrance to their suffering and following death is dishonored by denial as in the case of the Armenians or by oblivion as it is in the case of the Kurds. How come? Power relations are at stake. When the Nazis were defeated, no one had an interest in denying their crimes. But in the case of Armenian and Kurdish victims things are different. They were weak then and they are even weak today. Their murderers were strong then and are even strong today. The Ottoman Empire was succeeded by the Turkish republic which has enough power and means to fight the recognition of the Armenian genocide. Also that nation

has powerful allies or friends that are not interested in a clash with the republic because of political, economical and geopolitical reasons. The Iraq of Saddam was at the times of the Halabja genocide still a powerful regional player. It has disappeared but this made the Kurds not yet strong enough to push through their demands for recognition of all the crimes that have been committed against them by so many states in the region. The Kurds are in the same position like the Armenians today: they are small and try to make the international community remember and recognize the respective genocides.

How to deal with genocide? Genocide is being denied for national interest or national pride. Policy makers, opinion makers, common citizens deny because they see the responsibility for genocide as incompatible with the honor of their nation. To them the honor of their state transcends the honor of the victims. We must think the other way round. We must transcend state interest in the name of humankind. We must think as an inter-national community. When humanity is being attacked, e.g. by a genocide, the international community must act and condemn the murderers. This must apply to genocides that still could take place, but also for genocides that were committed in the past. The excuse 'oh, it is such a long time ago, let the dead bury their dead', means symbolic murder. A symbolic condemnation of past genocides must be directed against the regime that committed the genocide. People who live in the succeeding state are not to blame, except when they would continue to deny these crimes.

Do the deniers of a genocide have to be afraid that the honor of their nation would be stained by recognizing the genocide? I am concluding with the German example with which I started. This example demonstrates how much the German nation demonstrates civilization by dealing openly with its past and how much it is being respected for this.

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